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CHAPTER 1

THE WITCHES' TEETH



India Bentley stopped wading through the thick tidal mud and checked the horizon for any sign of southsiders. The first thing you learned when you lived on the North London shores was to keep your eyes peeled for southsiders. They'd come tearing across the water in skim boats and if they caught you unawares then you'd most likely get taken. Mehmet said it was the women they wanted mostly, them and the livestock. He said India shouldn't think she was safe just because she was only thirteen neither, 'cos a girl of thirteen was a woman as far as southsiders was concerned'.

But there was nothing much to see, just the vast swollen body of the Thames and the dead towers of the old city, sticking out of the water all hollow and bird-streaked, like witches' teeth in the distance. A lone scav-trawler sailed back and forth between the towers, dragging its iron grapple across the deep city beds in the hope of dredging up something useful.

She turned her attention to the small fishing net she'd staked out earlier. It was writhing and heavy to lift but she remembered to keep looking up while she worked. Only half-wits got taken by southsiders, she reckoned, mostly because they didn't check the horizon.

When she looked inside the net she sucked her teeth. Straight away she could see it was full of boneheads with yellow-dome skulls and blind eyes and needle-sharp teeth that snapped together like traps. Boneheads were no good to eat. They tasted rotten and sour on the day you caught them and they'd take a finger off if you weren't careful getting them out of the net.

Three summers ago, Tony Patel's dog had got caught in open water by a pack of boneheads. They dragged it under and stripped the flesh off it as it howled and thrashed in the water. Mehmet and his men were there but they just laughed and took bets on how long the dog would last until one of them finally put a bullet in its head. Then Mehmet said Tony should stop snivelling because it had always been a dumb excuse for a dog anyway.

She tipped the mutant fish back into the water, taking care not to get bitten. There were some sticklebacks at the bottom of the net that could go in the pot. They wouldn't make much of a meal, especially as Roshanne had a guest for dinner tonight, but Mr Clench never ate much and anyway, India couldn't care less if he choked on sticklebones. So she wrapped the little fishes in a damp piece of sacking, stuffed them in her satchel and then began to pick her way

back across the tidal flats. She skirted the silted spoil heaps at the edge of the water where the trawlers dumped the unusable stuff: plastic bottles, twisted road signs and those mysterious orange cones they pulled from the water in their hundreds.

India wondered if she had time to fetch water from the well before the constable's men went on patrol. The sky was like a lead sheet but there was still some light left in it. She'd need to be quick though. Apart from a southsider, the last person you wanted to meet after dark was Mehmet, especially when he'd been at the wood alcohol and was waving a shotgun around.

She'd always liked going to the well. Her father had drilled it when he'd been home on leave. They'd sit together on the lid and he'd talk about a time before London was a lake, when it was a city with glass buildings and cars and everybody had enough food and fresh water. 'As much food as they wanted, India. Imagine that.' Then he'd sigh and look out over the water. 'The Great Rains washed it all away, though. All we've got left now is those dead towers.'

Then he told her stories about the cold country where he spent most of his time working, where a man could still have an adventure if he wanted it. It was a land filled with bears and wolves and ice people who hunted on reindeer sledges. A place where a hot cup of tea would freeze before it hit the ground. It was a place, he said, where ancient spirits lived beneath the mountains and living shadows stalked the forests.

When India arrived at the well she was not pleased to see someone was already there. An old woman was standing on the grassy slope, gazing upwards and holding out her arms.

'Chicken Licken!' she shouted to the sky as India drew near.

'Hello, Cromerty,' said India.

India's mother had never allowed her to call Cromerty a witch the way other children did. She said Cromerty was just an old person who needed someone to watch out for her. She had always tried to make sure the old woman had enough to eat in winter.

As India approached she saw Cromerty was wearing only a thin nightgown and a single slipper. Her hair stuck out like grey wire. The old woman fixed her with watery eyes and gave her a toothless smile.

'There's something wrong with the sky,' she said urgently. 'Can't yer see? It looks like iron.'

India glanced up at the uniform sheet of grey cloud. 'It's always that colour, Cromerty,' she said, 'it's just rain clouds.'

'Anyone can see the sky, deary,' replied the old woman. 'But do you really *see* it? There's iron in the sky if you knows how to look for it.'

'Well, I don't think I can see it, Cromerty. Look, if you don't mind, I need to get some water.'

The old woman was not to be put off, and shuffled along behind India. 'There's not many of us what's got the seein', deary. Maybe you got it, maybe not, but your mum definitely had it.'

India stopped and turned to look at the old woman. 'My mum?'

'Aye, she knowed the winds and the tides and she could tell if there were something wrong in the land just by listening to the earth spirits.' She brightened suddenly. 'Read your palm, deary? You never know – you might be going on a journey.'

India sighed. 'I don't think so, Cromerty. I really need to get on.'

'Well, let me know if you change your mind.'

'You should get inside the fence now, Cromerty. It's getting dark out here.'

The old woman ignored her and began to croon to herself. India guessed that Cromerty was having a bad day.

When India turned to the well, her heart sank. The lock on the lid was broken. Not just broken either: it looked as though it had been torn apart. 'Cromerty, did you see who did this?'

The old woman didn't reply. She was rocking back and forth, humming softly. '*First comes the iron and then comes the snow*,' she sang, '*and then comes the winter when nothing will grow*.'

India looked down the well. Mehmet often warned that southsiders might poison the water. She thumped the lid in frustration. The curfew was about to start and she ran the risk of being locked out. But the thought that someone might have poisoned *her* well made her burn inside.

'Cromerty,' she said to the old woman. 'Go back to the

village and tell Mehmet to keep the gates open until I get back. Tell him I'll only be a few minutes.'

'Watch out for the sky, deary,' called the old woman as she retreated down the hill. 'There's summat wrong with it, I tell ya.'

India shook her head impatiently. 'Definitely having a bad day,' she said to herself. She slipped the broken lock into her pocket and began to climb the grassy slope.

The other side of the hill was where the dead city started. It was running with wild dogs and full of houses that no one had lived in for a hundred years, rotting like the bones of dead animals. It made her shiver just to see them. Even Mehmet and his men avoided going there if they could help it.

Then she spotted them: two people about a quarter of a mile away picking their way across the rubble. There wasn't much light but she could tell that one of them was a man, tall and powerful-looking. She dived under a bush where she could watch them in safety.

Suddenly the big man looked up and stared right at the spot where she was hiding. She knew he couldn't possibly see her in the failing light but even so, he seemed to look *straight at her*. He turned to say something to the second figure – a woman, India could now see – and then pointed in India's direction.

She slithered down the hill on her backside. Southsiders, cack! They had to be southsiders, they couldn't be anything else. Her heart was going so fast that she had to stop at

the bottom to catch her breath. The rules said she should run straight back to the village and report what she'd seen to the constable, but what if she was wrong? What if they were just a couple of mud grubbers from over Kilburn way or a pair of night fishermen? She could hear Mehmet now, laughing at her for having been so easily spooked. She paused.

The bank rose quite steeply where she was standing. She thought if she kept quiet and stayed near to the water, she might be able to get close enough to the strangers to get a good look at them. Then she could decide what to tell the constable's men.

She crept along the bank, staying low and trying not to make too much noise as she pulled her boots from the sucking mud. When she thought she was close enough she climbed the bank and peered over the top to take a look. The woman was less than a hundred yards away, looking at something in her hand. She had long hair, tied back into a ponytail, and she wore a leather flying jacket with a fur collar and heavy boots that came up to her knees. The tall man was nowhere to be seen. There was a motorcycle a short way off like the ones India had seen in pictures, a petrol burner, battered to hell and complete with sidecar. She shivered. No one in Highgate owned anything like that, which meant they *had* to be southsiders.

'You! Stay where you are!'

The voice made her jump and she slid down the bank into the wet mud. She glimpsed the man appearing from

the gloom to her right and then she was off at a sprint. But the man was much faster than she had expected. Before she'd gone five paces a big hand came down on her back and sent her sprawling face down into the mud.

'I said stay where you are.'

She kicked her legs and spluttered muddy water but the hand kept her firmly pinned down. She was scared now too, scared and angry with herself. Because she'd done the one thing that only dumb people did: she'd got caught by southsiders.